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ABSTRACT

The value of collaborative research carried out by local education agencies (LEAs) and institutions of higher learning (IHLs) has been established. The middle grades, in particular, present extreme needs and opportunities for collaboration because these years have been relatively neglected in the elementary secondary spectrum of education. Well-focused collaborative research tailored to the needs of the middle school student is needed to improve programs and develop appropriate reading strategies. Recommendations for improving collaborative research at the middle school level include: (1) focus on student achievement rather than control issues; (2) involve administration for support and improved understanding of the middle grades; (3) provide more incentives for LEA/IHL partnerships; (4) include more research methods and action research opportunities in teacher and administrator preparation; (5) lobby for better federal and state support for educational research; (6) use technology to enhance collaborative research; and (7) demonstrate more active support by LEAs and IHLs for each other. Success in collaborative efforts is most promising for models that are jointly controlled, involve practitioners and administrators at the outset, are long-term, and are built on mutual trust. (SLD)

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BUILDING A COLLABORATIVE MODEL TO ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF RESEARCH IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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Building a Collaborative Model to Enhance the Quality of Research in Middle Schools

The need for more and better collaboration between schools and school districts and institutions of higher learning is well acknowledged. The national reports of the 1980's called for major reform of America's entire educational hierarchy from pre-school to graduate schools. The reports frequently included recommendations for improved collaboration between LEA's (local education agencies) and IHL (institutions of higher learning).

The natural link between LEA and IHL is also well-established. Together the two entities are more complete than either is alone. Indeed, the relationship between the two is one of co-dependency. They complement each other in their varying dispositions of reflection and action, theory and practice, and research and practical application. They share a mutual goal: to provide the best possible education for students. The potentials of either the LEA or the IHL are maximized and fully actualized only when the two are working together in a symbiotic relationship (Goodlad, 1988). "[T]he university and the school district are each other's own best resource," writes Walter Hathaway (1985) in his paper on school-university collaboration. "Between them, school districts and universities cover virtually the whole range of human learning. That we are interconnected is undeniable" (p. 2).

The benefits of collaboration between school and university are too important to let the problems about the cooperative endeavor:

The stake that colleges and universities have in schools and school districts is obvious. Without a well-educated secondary student population, universities will have virtually no applicant pool(Hathaway, p.2)

Additional benefits to colleges and universities working with LEA's is access to research sites and practical contexts in which to evaluate concepts and test theories, field-based internships for students in teaching and administrator training programs, not to mention critical information about what is relevant and current for higher education to incorporate into their programs.

School districts also benefit from collaboration with higher education. Without sound, theoretical bases on which to build programs, schools are doomed to band-wagons and false panaceas in an effort to improve or - as is more often the case - in the struggle just to prevent further decline. Schools and districts need the expertise of higher education to select or design, implement, monitor, and evaluate new instructional and administrative practices and programs. Implementation of new programs is too often done haphazardly by school districts with inadequate training of staff and too little monitoring or

evaluating to ensure critical features of a new program or instructional practice are actually being followed and teachers are being given the kind of feedback and support so essential to the success of most programs and new practices.

Despite the overwhelming evidence to support more research collaboration between LEA's and IHL, why does so little exist? Conflict often arises between LEA's and IHL's because of their different orientations. What should and can be complementary qualities often become sources of friction in collaborative endeavors between schools and universities. In the day-to-day operations of the two entities, players in both arenas frequently lose sight of the mutuality of their goals and their need to work together to improve the quality of educational experiences for students and teachers at all levels. Another problem is that substantive support for educational research in general is more rhetorical than real. Pearlman (1990) claims, "R & D investment per employee - a key factor of competitive advantage - is less than \$50 a year in education, compared with \$5,000 in a typical business and \$20,000 to \$40,000 or more in a high-tech business" (p. 13). The federal government's total R & D expenditure in 1989 was \$62 billion of which education received \$145.6 million - a whopping two-tenths of 1% of the total amount (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1990). This lack of support for educational research runs counter to the national outcry for school reform that has persisted for a decade.

However, researchers in education are frequently blamed for

contributing to the negative attitudes toward their work:

[E]ducation research typically has been theory driven, not problem driven, and laboratory, rather than school, based. . . . [R]esearchers have tended to focus on discrete and decontextualized variables . . . instead of helping teachers and administrators develop effective instructional and organizational models, or programs (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1990, p 103)

As a result of educational research's orientation toward studying isolated variables, many inside and outside the profession have come to regard it as relatively unimportant and, for the most part, uninterpretable. The Fuchs quote William Blakey, aide to Senator Paul Simon and a member of the Senate education subcommittee in 1987, as having said, "Congress still believes education research is more contemplative of the navel than anything that will benefit education" (Fuchs, p.104).

Then there's the nagging issue of control. The question of who is to be in control of the partnership between LEA and IHL is frequently a source of friction. LEA's resent IHL coming into their districts and dictating to them about the conduct of research and implementation of change efforts without involving them sufficiently. This, they say, is one cause for so much irrelevancy in the research endeavors in education.

Lest one concludes that all the fault for the poor quality of research and the lack of LEA/IHL collaboration rests on the shoulders of the higher education community, it is important to consider the schools' and school districts' contributions to the problem as well. Bernie Martin, a former associate director of NIE, asserts that Congress's dim view of educational R & D merely reflects the opinions of school practitioners who are themselves most skeptical of the research (Kaestle, 1993). Too LEA's have historically been suspicious of the motives of IHL in conducting school-based research. Without a commitment to or reward for supporting research, practitioners are reluctant to open their doors to university researchers whom, they feel, are coming primarily out of necessity as a part of their evaluation process. "Many researchers," write the Fuchs, "even those with federal funding, find they must scale a high wall of mistrust before convincing schools to participate in R & D" (1990, p. 105). In addition to many LEAs' unwillingness to cooperate and general mistrust of IHL, there exists the frustrations and downright hard work involved in school-based research, even when a school is cooperative with researchers:

It must be remembered, however, that doing R & D is WORK, demanding work at that. The demands are not just intellectual. The demands are interpersonal, how to maintain one's sense of self and still become a member

of a cohort group. They are physical
 They are contextual The demands are
 [also] ideological. (Griffin, 1983, p.17)

The hectic atmosphere of most schools does not lend itself to conducting research. Little time to plan, talk, reflect, gather information, modify processes or evaluate treatments exist in the school day which is further complicated by frequent disruptions and absenteeism among staff and students.

Despite the problems associated with collaborative work between LEA's and IHL, many collaborative endeavors work well and are successful in contributing to the field and in meeting the needs of both partners (e.g. Knight, Wiseman, & Smith, 1993; Hathaway, 1985; Lampert, 1985; Brown & Palincsar, 1987; Carpenter, Fennema, Peterson, Chiang, & Loef, 1989). The challenges that face all educators at all levels today require the combined efforts of schools and universities and colleges to bring together the resources essential to the tasks at hand. The work of contemporary educational thinkers such as Goodlad, Sirotnik, Cuban, and Boyer provides insight and understanding about the multifaceted dimensions of LEA/IHL collaboration. Attention seems to be focusing on mobilizing more and better forms of teamwork between the reluctant partners as the nation struggles to improve, perhaps to salvage, the schools. Referring to LEA/IHL collaboration, Walter Hathaway writes, "The challenge before us is to realize and build upon the extent, the

possibilities, and the necessity of our connection and dependence" (p. 2).

MODELS OF LEA/IHL COLLABORATION

Models of collaborative research efforts between LEA's and IHL come in many forms. Ward and Tikunoff (1983) identify four patterns of LEA/IHL collaboration: **school-based collaboration** with only school members included; **school-district-college/university collaboration** on school improvement and problem solving; **university based collaboration** with the intent of establishing the receptivity of school persons to the conduct of research in their "home" settings; and **interactive research and development on teaching** which accounts for individual and institutional interaction. The last pattern, IR&DT, was developed by Ward and Tikunoff in order to remedy some of the problems usually associated with educational research and development. Among its essential features was the ensurance that school practitioners would be well-represented and not subordinate to IHL representatives, an attempt to deal effectively with the issue of control. The IR&DT model also had what its developers considered to be unique - the interaction between research and development which reduced the usual time lag between the two processes (Griffin, 1983).

McLean (1984) refers to three forms of interaction between LEA and IHL: IHE controlled, LEA controlled, and jointly controlled. He endorses the last form of interaction involving

shared control which, he says, includes an increasing number of arrangements such as sharing of resources and personnel; faculty exchange programs; consortia; as well as collaborative research:

Cooperative research beneficially reduces the gap that separates the generation of knowledge and its use in schools while improving the relevance and validity of the research itself. LEA's gain access to superior facilities, programs, delivery systems, climate, and training at lower cost. IHE gain a direct link to one of the major social subsystems they seek to influence, along with access to the experience and insight of practitioners for improving research
(Hathaway, pp. 6-7)

Wilbur and Stadel (1984) describe a successful research consortium, Willamette Vally (Oregon) Education Consortium with representative participants from Western Oregon State College, the Teaching Research Division of the Oregon State System of Higher Education, eight school districts, and three education service districts:

The model guiding VEC's work holds clear that a clear and meaningful set of expectations for student learning is the cornerstone of effective schooling. The model indicates that intended learning outcomes are to be

and the problems these differences caused. Ultimately, the partnership had to "refine[d] their processes and roles to create a reasonable balance between the worlds of researchers and teachers" (Hatstrup & Bickel, p. 39). The result of this collaborative endeavor was the production of mathematics materials that reflect the practical insights of the teachers, the latest research from the professors, and the standards established by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM 1989).

In some models of LEA/IHL collaboration, the classroom becomes the laboratory where basic research is conducted first-hand. Increasingly, researchers are concerned about the complexities of learning that include contextual and social variables which artificial settings do not simulate very well. In discussing this form of collaborative research, Kaestle (1993) comments:

This model not only transforms the old research procedure; it sees the teacher in a different light than in the old model of dissemination, where research was translated into products for teachers to use. Here the currency is ideas, and the transformation is done by the teacher. (Kaestle, p. 26)

Hathaway recommends several guiding principles for collaborative efforts between LEA and IHL. Some of his recommendations are

based on the work of Ernest Boyer and include the following:

- * Educators at both levels must agree that they do have common problems.
- * The traditional academic pecking order must be overcome.
- * Successful cooperative projects must be sharply focused.
- * For school/college cooperation to succeed, participants must get recognition and rewards.
- * Cooperative programs must focus on action, not machinery.
- * The more an innovation is "owned" by those affected by its adoption, the more likely it will be accepted.
- * Innovations that are implemented without accompanying support from top administrators usually do not meet with lasting success.
- * Innovations with structures, values, and purposes that comfortably mesh with those of the organization are more likely to be accepted than those that do not.
- * When new skills are involved, participants should receive adequate training for their new roles.
- * All persons involved in planning and implementing anything new should expect some problems. (Hathaway, pp.18-19)

These principles are no less applicable at the middle school level, and may be even more appropriate considering the newness of the field. For example, a major problem in transforming junior high schools to middle schools is in the implementation of new programs. Practitioners may have an

academic understanding of the transescent's needs but, without proper training and support, be unable to translate their awareness into a practical application and role revision in dealing with students in the classroom. Too often, teachers and administrators have received the barest of training in their attempts to convert schools into "middle schools" - where major overhauls and restructuring of all aspects of the school (from curriculum content, counseling programs, and scheduling to approaches to classroom management and redefining roles) are essential for the conversion to be actualized.

UNIQUE NEEDS OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS

While collaborative research is sorely needed at all levels of education to gain better insight into teaching and learning and to provide stronger alliances between LEA's and IHL in general, the middles grades (grades 6, 7, & 8) present some extreme needs and opportunities for collaboration since these grades have emerged so recently as the "neglected years" in the K-12 spectrum of education. These in-between years are clearly the most perplexing, misunderstood, and least researched in the school life span.

Only since the 1960's has the middle school begun to emerge as a needed replacement for the junior high school in this country. Eleven to thirteen year old students have special developmental needs (social, emotional, and cognitive) that schools fashioned after high schools or after elementary schools

simply cannot meet (NASSP, 1985). The middle school movement in its attempt to meet the specific needs of preadolescent students, has met with varying degrees of success across the nation. Even yet, recognition of the importance of these ages in the school span is not consistent. Colleges and universities vary widely in their degree programs with "middle school" concentrations oftentimes left unaddressed or coupled with the elementary concentration for education majors. State certification regulations frequently exclude middle grades as an official area of certification. Many junior high schools have been changed to middle schools in name only; and although the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades have been housed separately from the elementary and secondary levels in most school systems, appropriate development of programs for these middle level students has been sluggish and rife with problems in implementation. Better collaborative research is needed to reinforce and enhance the middle school movement with respect to the needs of both the LEA and IHL.

Middle grades students have their own special needs that researchers and practitioners must address to bring the "forgotten years" into focus for better understanding and improved educational practices. One such collaboration between researchers Martin Maehr and Carol Midgley with school leaders at the middle school level has resulted in a set of strategies that when applied to school structures create a more task-focused learning environment. Basing their task-focus on preadolescents'

increasing self-awareness and concern about their status compared to their peers, the research efforts attempt to give schools concrete suggestions for directing policies and practices toward task-focused goals and de-emphasizing ability-focused goals:

Maehr and Midgley's team from the University of Michigan approached the school with a framework for change - a framework based on their theories concerning task versus ability goals. The university team has met and continues to meet weekly with a leadership team from the school. While the university team provides the theory and guidance, the school team chooses the policies and procedures for review and change. (Thurston, 1993, p.2)

More of this type of well-focused, collaborative research tailored to the needs of the middle school student is needed to improve programs and develop appropriate teaching strategies. Because of the extreme variability of the maturity levels of middle grade students, their cognitive, emotional, and social needs are mixed and changing rapidly. Their physiology is no less variable and can be quite deceptive; the middle grades can be a time of rapid physical growth, giving some students the appearance of more maturity than they possess emotionally, socially, or cognitively. At no other grade levels are the problems in growth and development as exaggerated nor as

traumatic to the individual as in the preadolescent years. When this unique aspect of middle schools is coupled with the realization that this is the last chance to prevent some students from dropping out of school, the urgency to make these middle school years sensitive to the needs of these fractious youngsters becomes all the more magnified.

Teachers of middle grades students have special needs too. Teachers at this level are especially vulnerable to stress and burn-out because of the extreme demands of their student population. Many of these teachers have had none or minimal training in working with middle grades students. In most instances, either their focus was elementary or secondary in their teacher education programs. Middle grades teachers need better programs of preparation and exceptionally well-designed in-service education and staff development to help them deal with the complexities of schooling at this level. Collaborative research with IHL professors has the potential to provide a much needed dimension of support and collegial exchange about concerns and problems that are related specifically to the middle grades. The benefits of an on-going, collaborative arrangement between LEA and IHL are multi-faceted and have the potential to add to the rather limited body of research related to middle schools while providing the nurturance and support that struggling practitioners and isolated professors can so ably lend each other.

Another unique aspect of the middle school is its

transitional position between the elementary and secondary school experiences. The middle school must provide a safe passage from childhood to adulthood in a relatively short time span. Educators in middle schools must understand both the elementary as well as the secondary school experience in order to provide the necessary link for youngsters moving between the two realms.

During these difficult middle years, parents are oftentimes confused and bewildered by the changes going on with their preadolescent. Although they do not show it, middle grades youngsters are especially in need of the love and support of their families during these formative years when they are seeking their independence but have yet to formulate a strong sense of self-identity. Schools can play an important role in helping parents and their preadolescent children to understand each other. Parents need to remain involved in their child's education throughout the school experience, but during the middle grades, such involvement is perhaps more critical than ever. . . for parent, school, and child.

Thus, the middle school presents some rather unusual and special opportunities for collaborative research to provide more and better direction for educating our preadolescent population of youngsters. While research to date has yielded good information about the needs of the preadolescent, research is still lacking in areas related to appropriate programs and pedagogy essential to provide adequately for the middle grades student. Areas in need of more research tailored for the middle

school level include a wide range of concerns - instructional strategies, administrative strategies, parenting strategies, involvement of parents and the community, staff development strategies, teacher and administrator preparation programs, as well as organizational restructuring to meet the needs of middle grades students. Neither LEA nor IHL is equipped to research these complex concerns alone. Collaborative efforts will be more likely to find answers to the many questions still surrounding the middle school years.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH AT THE MIDDLE GRADES LEVEL

While a variety of LEA/IHL collaborative research models has been shown to be effective, the following suggestions seem especially pertinent for enhancing research collaboration efforts at the middle grades level:

***Focus on student achievement; downplay control issue.**

- . research may be initiated or directed by either LEA or IHL or jointly controlled
- . mutual respect and understanding between practitioner and researcher are essential

***Involve administration for support and improved understanding of middle grades.**

***Provide more incentives for LEA/IHL partnerships:**

- . include in performance evaluation criteria for

practitioners and professors

- . develop shared accountability measures for student performance
- . recognize and show appreciation for collaborative research efforts (bonuses, resources, release time)

***Include more research methods and action research opportunities in teacher and administrator preparation programs.**

***Do more lobbying for better federal and state support for funding educational research.** Middle school needs are so blatant, legislators should be receptive to supporting more research at this level.

***Use technology to enhance collaborative research:**

- . to minimize logistical and geographical barriers
- . to improve dissemination of research results
- . to increase frequency of interaction and contact between LEA/IHL
- . to improve reflective sharing and dialogue
- . to provide a nationwide network for professional exchange of ideas and research findings
- . to improve record-keeping and enhance longitudinal studies
- . for improved program monitoring, evaluation, and documentation of progress and results

***Demonstrate more active support for each other.** LEA's and IHL should present a together front to strengthen public

support for educational research funding.

CONCLUSION

Considering the dynamic needs of middle grades, the field is ripe for establishing partnerships for research between LEA's and IHL. Although collaboration models vary in their appropriateness for specific contexts and purposes, success is most promising for those models that are jointly controlled, involve practitioners and administrators at the outset, focus on student achievement and growth, are long-term, and are built on a basis of mutual trust and a spirit of collegiality between schools and universities.

Research is needed in a wide array of middle grades concerns of which most critical are improved implementation of programs with well-monitored and documented effectiveness of specific strategies, improved programs of staff development and support for teachers at middle grades, increased understanding for all adults dealing with preadolescents (parents, teachers, community, and administrators), and more appropriate programs of preparation for teachers.

For LEA's and IHL to resist collaboration to find better solutions to these problems, legislators to refuse adequate funding for educational research, or administrators to continue to ignore the need for incentives to encourage professor/teacher and university/school partnerships is short-sighted, inefficient, ineffective, and irresponsible on each constituent's part. With

each player in this scenario pulling his weight, taking responsible initiative, and providing adequate resources, better educational research should provide better educational opportunities for young people at all levels, including the special middle school years.

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